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Discussion called key to technological lead

WASHINGTON (AP)—There is little evidence that open scientific discussion hurts national security, and some government attempts to control information could hurt the country's technical progress, a National Academy of Sciences panel said Thursday.

The nation's technical lead may be better protected by continued research and discovery than by trying to restrict access to what is known, the special panel said.

However, the panel, which received several top-secret briefings during its study, reviewed evidence of technology lost to the Soviets and their allies and found the problem "substantial and serious."

The Soviets get most of this information through legal equipment purchases, outright espionage, illegal international trade and leaks from legal recipients abroad, it said.

But the investigation "failed to reveal specific evidence of damage to U.S. national security caused by information obtained from U.S. academic sources," it concluded.

THE SEVEN-MONTH study indicates only a "very small part" of the technology this country loses to the Soviet Union can be attributed to open scientific communication through meetings and publications.

The "limited and uncertain benefits" of controls are "outweighed by the importance of scientific progress, which open communication accelerates, to the overall welfare of the nation," said the Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy.

The group acknowledged there is a legitimate need to safeguard information, particularly technical expertise that can be applied to military design and production.

However, it said, this involves only a small amount of civilian research, and

the government should develop a consistent policy for such controls.

The controversy about government restrictions on research results, particularly from universities, has been growing for last five years.

THERE WERE repeated warnings from Adm. Bobby Inman, former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and others that science-related security had to be tightened.

Despite protests from scientists, government agencies have restricted publication of papers, prevented presentations at meetings and restricted admittance of foreign scientists to the U.S.

Last month the Defense Department blocked presentation of almost 100 unclassified papers at an optical engineering meeting in San Diego. The department said some of the work might have military implications, and Soviet scientists attended the international meeting.

The academy study, chaired by Dr. Dale Corson, president emeritus of Cornell University, was sponsored by the Defense Department, the National Science Foundation and several scientific organizations. It was intended to find ways to resolve the controversy.

The panel recommended three guidelines it said would allow all but a small portion of government-funded, academically based research to continue without restrictions:

- The vast majority of university work should be unrestricted.

- In rare cases where research meets specific criteria, such as work with direct military application, it should get prior security classification.

- In the few "gray-area" cases, when there is potential but unproven military application, limited control may be justified. But these measures, such as restricting direct work by foreign scientists, should be specified by contract before the project begins.